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List 33

Beyond Light

Liliane Lijn

Bill Culbert

Arts Council

Liliane Lijn

Front cover Denslens (Detail), 1975 (?)
Above Portrait of the Artist, 1976

Liliane Lijn

Born in New York City in 1939. Left the USA in 1955 and went to live in Lugano, Switzerland. Studied at the Liceo Cantonale di Lugano. Studied Archaeology and History of Art at the Sorbonne and the Ecole du Louvre from 1958–1961. Became involved in the tail end of the Surrealist movement; experimented with interchangeable forms ("puzzle sculpture") and taught herself to draw, working on a series of wax crayon, gouache and india ink drawings. Worked in New York City 1961–62. Experimented with plastics using fire and acids; made first kinetic light relief which was shown at the Fishbach Gallery, New York. Worked in Paris 1963–64. First one-woman show at La Librairie Anglaise. Lived and worked in Athens 1964–66. Came to London in 1966 at the invitation of Signals Gallery and has since lived and worked here.

One-woman exhibitions

1963 La Librairie Anglaise, Paris
1967 Indica Gallery, London
1970 Hanover Gallery, London
1972 Galerie Germain, Paris
1973 Bill Jordan Gallery, London

Some group exhibitions

1964 Salon des Comparaisons, Paris: *First & Second Pilot of Kinetic Art*, Signals Gallery, London
1965 *Art & Movement* (organised by the Arts Council of Great Britain)
1966 *Art Electric*, Gallery Ileana Sonnabend, Paris; *White on White*, Kunsthalle, Berne; *In motion*, Arts Council touring exhibition, Oxford, Cambridge, Oldham and Leeds
1967 *Light and Movement*, Museum of Modern Art, Paris; *Science Fiction*, Kunsthalle Berne, Musée d'Art Decoratif, Paris, Düsseldorf Museum; *Nuove Techniche d'Immagine*, Biennale de San Marino, Italy; *Cinquième Biennale de Paris*
1968 *Art Vivant*, Fondation Maeght, St Paul de Vence; *Primera Exposition International de Poesia de Vanguardia*, Instituto di Tella, Buenos Aires; *Continuum*, Axiom Gallery, London; *Prospect '68*, Düsseldorf Museum
1969 *Kinetic Art*, Kunstnishus Oslo, Helsinki, Gotenburg
1970 *Kinetic Art*, Hayward Gallery, London
1971 *Spectrum*, Alexandra Palace, London
1972 *City Sculpture Project*, sponsored by the Peter Stuyvesant Foundation and the Arnolfini Gallery, Plymouth and London
1973 *Agam, Bury, Lijn, Soto, Takis*, Delson Richter Galleries, Tel Aviv
1974 *British Sculptors – Attitudes to Drawing*, Sunderland Arts Centre; *Light Now*, event at the Blackie, Liverpool; *The Power Game*, event held during the International Festival for Chilean Liberation, Royal College of Art, London
1975 *The Video Show*, Serpentine Gallery, London
1976 *Mouvement Peint, Mouvement Agi*, Centre d'Art Contemporain de l'Abbaye de Beaulieu, France; Artists' Market, London; Bradford Print Biennale

Public collections include

Tate Gallery; Musée de la Ville de Paris; CNAC, Paris; Arts Council of Great Britain; University of Warwick; Victoria & Albert Museum; Camden Library; Atlantic Richfield Corporation, NY; Wasserman Collection, Boston; Contemporary Art Society; Glasgow Museum, Kelvingrove

Commissions

Bebington Civic Centre, Liverpool: *Spiral Spectrum Fountain*. 50ft diameter water and light kinetic fountain.
Curtis & Davis Architects, New Orleans & New York: *Liquid Reflections*. 4ft diameter perspex and water kinetic sculpture.
Alecto Print Commission Award at the 1976 Bradford Print Biennale.

Publications

La Lune en Rodage, Karl Lazlo 1964 Basel;
Art as Research, Cyril Barrett, *Studio International* June 1967;
Liliane Lijn in discussion with Vera Lindsay, *Studio International* May 1969;
The Inside of a Work is to Find Out, Liliane Lijn, *Art & Artists* January 1971;
The Functionalism of Art, Alastair Mackintosh, *Art & Artists* March 1973.

Film

'What is the sound of one hand clapping?', produced and directed by the artist, 1972–73.

Video

The Power Game, produced in collaboration with A. Mackintosh and Gt. Georges Project.

List of Works

1 Homage to Milarepa, 1972
Laminated perspex base with light box underneath, mirror set into centre; perspex and optical glass prism figures. 61 × 61 × 51cm

2 In the Valley of Darkness, 1973
Stove-enamelled black aluminium base, chemi-blacked steel and optical glass prisms. 107 × 81.5 × 45.5cm

3 When Three becomes Five there is No Other, 1976
Anodised aluminium and optical glass prisms. 89 × 91.5 × 51cm

4 Through Another Eye, 1974
Three piece alignment, viewer becomes third element: rotating column of perspex wound with .012" nickel wire and set on a small turntable 54 × 5cm diameter, 10cm diam. at base: Lenspiece of satin-chromed steel and semispherical optical glass lens

5 Thisthat, 1975
Three piece alignment as above: column 51 × 5cm – 11.5cm at base, perspex wound with nickel wire, pronounced pattern: lenspiece 33 × 20 × 4.5cm faceted lens

6 Thisthat II, 1975
As above with change in pattern on column

7 Denslens, 1975
As above with change in pattern on column

8 Threes, 1974–5
A group of six separate sculptures. 1m 67cm high, base size 23 × 23 × 15cm. Five pieces composed of 3 aluminium tubes 1m 52cm high 4cm in diam. wound with .012" nickel wire, in two different spatial arrangements on base/turntable; one 3 column piece of same dimensions is wound with .018" copper wire

9 High Nine, 1974–75
Nine aluminium tubes 101cm long, 5cm diam. each patterned and wound with .012" nickel wire, held and rotating in a black anodised aluminium frame containing an open ball drive system and 5rpm Creuzet motor. 122 × 57 × 7.5cm

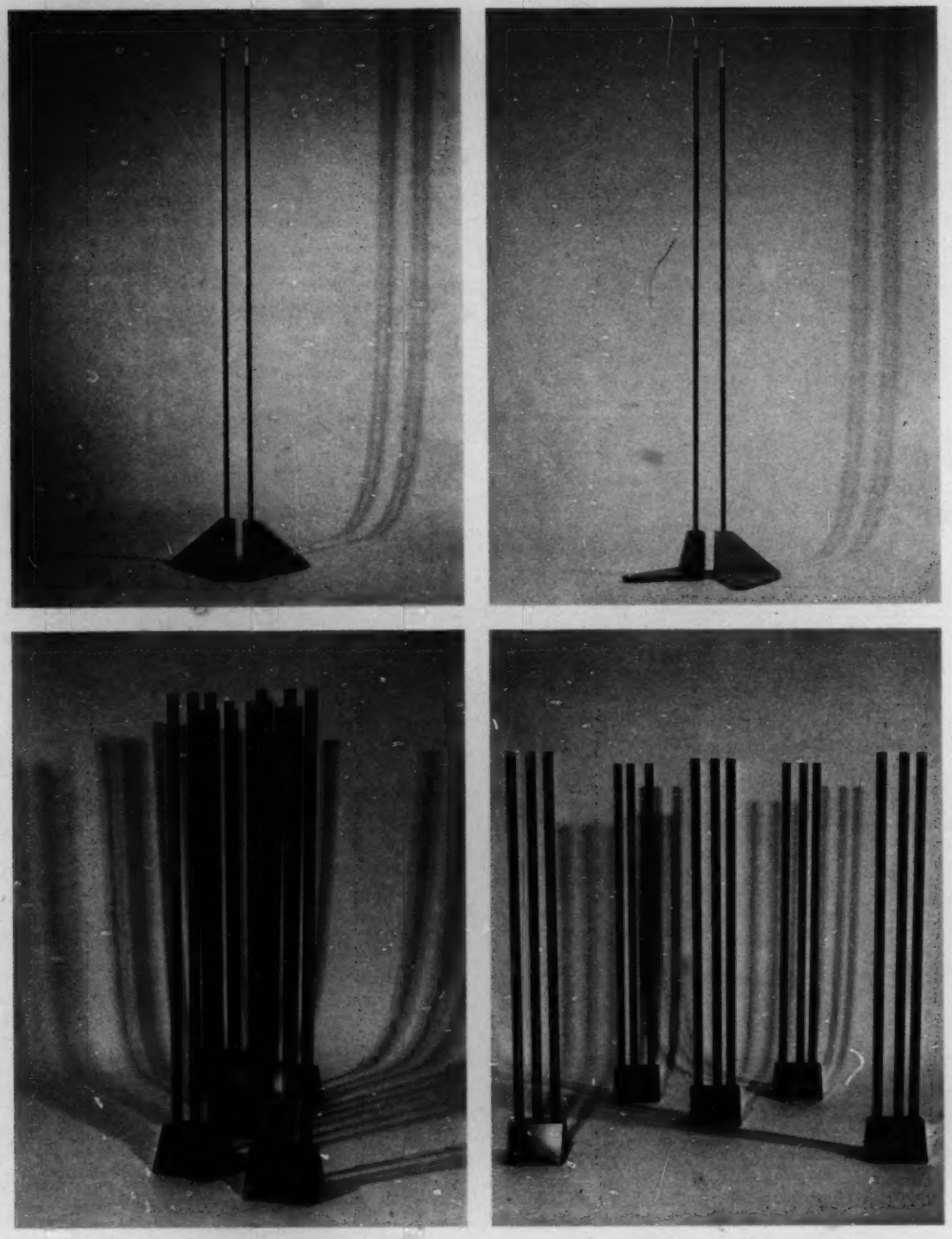
10 Line I, 1976
213.5cm high, 2cm diam. aluminium rod wound with .004" nickel wire. Base 35.5 × 35.5 × 2cm and turntable box 35.5 × 7.7 × 15cm steel finished matt white cellulose. Creuzet motor 5rpm

11 Line II, 1976
244cm high, 2.5cm diam. stainless tube wound with .012" nickel wire. Top 10cm left unwound, painted white with .5cm blue horizontal stripe. Base 35.5 × 35.5 × 1.3cm faceted at corners, turntable cover 43 × 7 × 19.7cm at apex, painted steel. Creuzet motor 5rpm

12 Line III, 1976
244cm high, 2cm diam. stainless tube wound with .006" copper wire and .004" nickel wire in alternate strands. Top 10cm left unwound and painted white with one 1.5cm grey horizontal stripe. Triangular base/turntable 30 × 37 × 39 × 1cm thick steel finished in matt grey cellulose. Creuzet motor 5rpm

13 Line IV, 1976
244cm high, 2cm diam. stainless tube wound with .066" copper wire and .007" nickel wire in alternate strands. Top 14cm left unwound and painted white with one 1.5cm grey horizontal stripe

I would like to thank Mr A J Moore of BICC Research and Engineering Ltd for his generous assistance in the winding of the *Lines* series of sculptures.



Top Line III and Line IV (in two arrangements), 1976 (12, 13)
Bottom Threes (grouped in cluster and in formal arrangement), 1974–5 (8)

An interview with Liliane Lijn conducted and taped in her studio in London on Friday 13th August 1976 by Asa Benveniste

AB I've always, adolescently perhaps, been interested in how anyone comes to make art or poetry or music, and I think it's got something to do with heroism. One sees oneself as an heroic individual. And I've got a feeling most artists start like that. But I'd like to ask you when the concept of art first entered your life. And then how . . .

LL Do you want to ask me how I started making art?

AB When did you become aware that you were an artist? Describe it to me.

LL I never thought of myself in heroic terms. In fact, I think at the age of 13 or 14 I wanted to be a journalist and then perhaps go on to writing, but my idea of writing was very vague. Basically I try to think in concrete terms and, therefore, it was journalism. I liked to draw, and I thought maybe fashion design, as I thought – you know – you make money out of fashion design. I wasn't going to think of anything vague. That was 13. And then when I was 17 – I'd always drawn and made things – but at 17 I was at a lycée in Lugano, in Switzerland, like a grammar school here. I was a year-and-a-half away from my diploma, and I joined a club of close friends, an art club of sorts. At that point I became interested, and at that point in time I started making forms with clay. I won't call it sculpture, that would be pretentious.

AB Do you know why you chose to make those forms?

LL Because I had met a ceramist during the summer, and he showed me his workshop. As I had this opportunity there of playing around with clay I continued on my own and found it fascinating, and one of the reasons I found it fascinating was because I lost myself in the clay. This was a wonderful pleasure. Later, I decided I wanted to paint. And so I bought some canvasses and colours and started painting. Now why did I paint? Because again I lost myself in paintings. I hallucinated, I took trips, mental trips, magical trips as I was painting.

AB And your paintings were abstract?

LL They weren't totally abstract, there were figures in them, but if anything they were slightly surreal. They were never abstract – you know, red stripe, blue stripe – they were never like that. They were always hallucinatory. It got to the point where I was so engrossed in these paintings I didn't want to go to school any more.

AB Had you seen any paintings . . . ?

LL Well, I didn't like museums. I went, of course, to all the national galleries and things when I came to Europe, but I didn't *like* museums, they put me off. Although the more I got involved in actually painting or drawing, the more necessary it became to see other work.

AB So the first paintings you looked at were in the realm of Renaissance paintings?

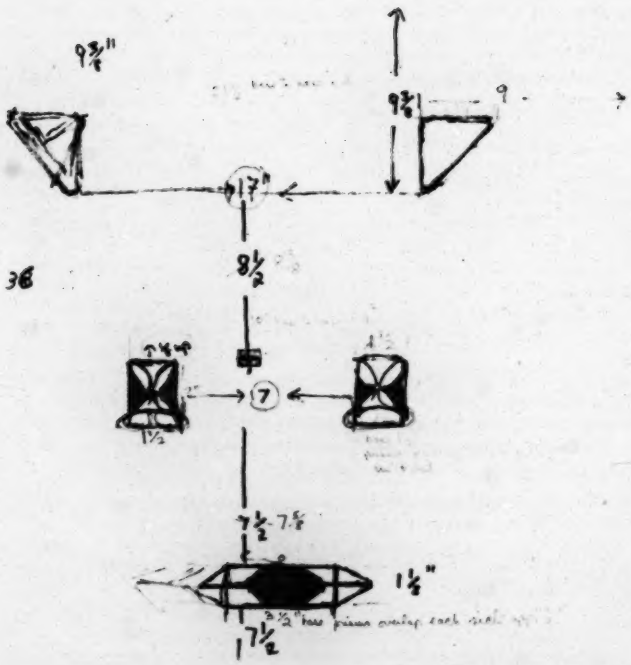
LL Not exclusively. I was more impressed by pre-classical art – Archaic Greek . . . Egyptian.

AB Anything else?

LL Well, I really liked Bosch – that was my first great fascination. I spent about a week in front of the *Garden of Delights*, in the Prado, drawing it and analysing it, figuring out its geometric structure, which I did figure out, and it was all based on triangles. I remember a lot of modern paintings put me off, but I loved Brancusi, right away. Immediately, when I was about 17. Just Brancusi. Full stop. You know, I saw Arp, and I didn't like it much. Later, I liked the surrealists. I liked Max Ernst.

AB When did your involvement with science begin? A strange complex kind of science, as I recall . . . not anything like biology – physics, isn't it?

LL Physics – this subject interests me most in the sciences today. I am also interested in astronomy. But physics seems to me more interesting. It goes into the structure of matter. The structure of matter is the patterns of matter, and an artist works with patterns. So that is why I relate to that, very clearly, now. But when I related to it from the beginning in 1961, and I picked up the magazine *Scientific American* and read a few bits which I didn't understand, I thought –



Layout plan for 'When 3 becomes 5 there is no other', 1976 (3)

poetry. This is poetry. I really loved it, it was so beautiful. Beautiful words like photon, graviton, electron . . . words that *sound*. And that's why I started reading science – not because I was interested in finding out. Everything happened to me in a random way. This is, I think, rather important for me because I always . . . because I can't even write a bloody biography . . . I didn't go to art school, I didn't win this award, you know, my life has been so irregular. Totally irregular. It isn't chaos though. And all the ways that I have found for myself have always been through irregularity. That's what I always found strange.

AB At some stage – perhaps you'd recall why – you became interested in kinetic art.

LL I *never* became interested in kinetic art as such.

AB I put that badly. What I meant was you are considered, when people think of your work, you are considered – at least in this country – as a kinetic artist concerned with. . .

LL Light!

AB . . . movement and especially light.

LL Light, yes. Movement doesn't exist. I mean you can't have anything that does not move. *Light* is the kind of movement – light . . . change – I'm concerned with. That something happens to change its physical state from static to mobile is of no interest to me at all. That's what we call movement. It moves; it was not moving; now it moves. That doesn't interest me at all. What interests me is change – you know, flow, change. In that sense movement interests me.

AB Are you interested in biological change? And does that come into your art? I suppose by biological change I mean simple changes that occur either in human beings or in plant species.

LL I'm trying to understand what that means. Biological change is very slow in time. As an artist you can only approach biological change with metaphor. Now, in that sense, yes, naturally, my work is really about biological change. In other words . . . well . . . yes . . . it's very hard to actually pin that down.

AB By metaphor you don't mean metamorphosis?

LL No, I mean metaphor. I'll give you an example. The mechanical movement of my columns is to rotate. If you just look at my columns and say 'those are nickel-wound columns rotating', the kinesis, or the kinetic implication of the columns is nil. So what? But if you disregard, and I make every attempt to make you disregard, the turning motion of my columns and just look at them or even glance at them – or live with them – then you'll see change which is kinetic but, perhaps, biological. In other words you see flow. It's a different thing. You know what I mean by flow? The movement of a line on the surface of the columns is natural – it's not only up and down, it's not only lateral – you know, it's not a vibration which is continual or programmed to change. It's an undulation which is continually flowing.

AB One of the characteristics . . . the changes that occur in your work have always been slow. It's not the kind of sculpture which moves quickly.

LL No, I've done quicker ones. The movement of most of my things, when I began, was quick. My poem machines, for example, revolved very fast. But then I made one with three speeds, and then I started going slow, and then I tried to find the right speed. Well, you know, in certain things there is a right speed. The *Liquid Reflections* only works at a certain speed, because otherwise the balls fall off. If it's too slow the balls don't move. Now, at the right speed I can balance it so the balls will move at different speeds – fast, slow, they change. So that my end product is not a fast product or a slow product. It is a product of varying motion. *Threes*, if you look at them superficially, are very slow moving. You can hardly see their motion, but if you keep looking at them, if you live with them, then you notice that each column in its line, in the line itself, has movements – different movements, separate movements – although they are all the same. They are fast and slow.

AB I did see that. Some of the facets you have on the vertical columns are done in such a way that they do quite quickly or quite slowly follow the light.

LL Purely a matter of spacing. The closer together the facets, the faster the movement; the further apart the facets, the slower. That's why I say these pieces are very important for me in the sense that they relate *time* to space.

AB Your work is mainly involved with some kind of mechanical process. In addition to change, in order to achieve this change in your work, you have to use mechanical means not subject to change itself. I wonder if you have ever thought possibly that that contradiction, that opposition, between the motivating power of your work and the effect it has . . .

LL The result . . .

AB . . . the result of your work is non-mechanical, and it seems to me an odd dichotomy which I wondered if you were aware of.

LL Yes, I am aware of it. In fact, in the prisms I don't use mechanical process. Prisms for me are important in that respect – that they've no electrics, and they are not even dependent upon electric light. I put them in the sun. You can watch them without any spotlight, as I do at home. Just happens in normal ambient light. But your question was interesting in any case because I think there is a contradiction, and I think that's something I've never thought about. I mean, I've always thought: what a drag to have to consider the drive mechanism. You know, I would love to do without, but I know I have to have it. The only thing I have done, as an artist, I could say, would be that I always try to treat my mechanism as a living thing. I don't treat it casually . . . you know, make me a turntable, Joe! My mechanisms have to be beautiful. Now this may sound silly, but I want my mechanism – the turntable itself – to be as important, as essential, as the piece.

AB That's very obvious in your work, yes. The mechanical means you use are always – and its one of the things I like about your work – are always incorporated in the whole of it – excuse the expression – aesthetically. Very often other artists whose work I've seen, who employ mechanical or electrical means of driving their sculpture, seem to disregard the source of the power, whereas your work incorporates it. It becomes a very beautiful part of the piece. For example, *Line* incorporates it so that it's part of the flow.

LL It's my latest piece. I'm getting better . . .

AB Yes.

LL I get better. And another thing I've become aware of – I mean I'll just ask you this question: how can we disregard our bodies? You talk about the contradiction between the mechanical part, the thing that gives power and the result of that power, and I would answer you by saying we live in a society where we are schizoid, we are mind and body, and they are separate. We live without realising we have bodies. This is what I am trying to write about in my book *The Crossing Map*. We're going to a world where people will be only minds – no body. The body has become irrelevant.

AB That brings me also, superficially, to . . .

LL But I don't believe in that! I'm an optimist. I'm trying to connect. I think we're all very divided, mind and body – and I think one has to connect one's mind with one's body. I've always been aware of it in my art, but suddenly I've realised it's not only art, it's you too, and one has to do something about it.

AB But how do you break down that separation? You've broken it down in your art.

LL My body's much more difficult. To be aware we are minds. I am not only aware of how to make a sculpture, I am also becoming aware of what I mean, you know? Even on one level, of what I've found, because for me making a sculpture is always just finding something.

AB To get back to the body and the way that you are trying to integrate your body with your mind – you do it by developing your awareness?

LL I think you have to do more than that. I used to think you develop your awareness, yes. Now I'm beginning to feel one actually needs to do physical things. You know – *physical* things. Massage your body, touch, you know. We're really wrecked, that's what I'm saying. We're in a bad state as human

beings today. And I think an artist should make a statement of that. I feel it's not only the position of an artist to make aesthetic things, but within that work there should be a statement about the situation. Now that's been done in the art world, conceptual art, social art . . . but it's all done *conceptually*. Nobody's really getting to the point. When you make a comment on society, it's not only capitalism and fascism and this and that – it's where are we? Where's our body?

AB Yes. There's one question I've been wanting to ask you, and I think it follows on well from what you've just said. Some of your sculptures – I'm thinking particularly of the *Homage to Milarepa* – strike me as being more figurative than abstract. It's made of prisms, but its constructions are really in the shapes not terribly far off – although vague – the shapes of landscape, individuals. The fact also that you've called it *Homage to Milarepa* evokes personage.

LL Right.

AB And, other than very obvious ones, are there differences in your work between abstract and figurative?

LL Asa, I don't believe in abstract as opposed to figurative. I don't believe in this disjunction between what are considered opposites. I believe . . .

(The telephone interrupts at this point, and a certain amount of the 'story' is diverted pell-mell onto a near, corresponding level.)

LL What we were talking about I think was that this has to do basically with our language and the primitiveness of our language. In order to communicate, we need to be, we try to be, specific. What we do is to make distinctions. Now these distinctions are not really specific, they do not give more. For example, when we say 'stone', how much of the stone, the reality of the stone, is contained in the word 'stone'? Right? For example, if we say 'spices', each spice has a name. If we just say 'spices', we get the general. Now we become more specific by naming each particular plant. A certain North American tribe – I think the Navahos – have perhaps a hundred different words for water, because water, in each way it was used, was called a different thing. We just say 'water'. The Navahos are very specific as opposed to making distinctions. Distinctions are a superficial way of defining the things we see. Now the more specific we can be to each other and to everything, the more power we give to it. It's only a little power anyway, because when you see a stone there's so much in it that can come to you. And if you say 'stone', it's only stone, the sound. So the more specific you can be with the sound, the more you can give to a person through sound, which is words – which is the way we communicate. Now, art is another way of communicating. It's not sound, it doesn't go through the ear, it goes through the eye. So there we can be more specific, which is why I became an artist – to be more specific – because I'm a greedy person, and I want a lot of energy. I need it, and I like to give it, and this is why I feel I'm an artist – not because of any heroic feeling. Ah! But it *is* heroic to want more energy. Heroes were people who were very energetic, so if we are specific about the word heroism, we know exactly what it means. Then we can say 'heroic'.

AB In that case, why do you feel the need to write poems? . . . remembering what you said about art being more specific than language. In art, you say, there aren't the kind of *primitive* distinctions which are made in language. Art can present the whole, instant aspect of whatever it is one is expressing.

LL Firstly, art is beset by the problem of distinctions. We say 'figurative' and 'abstract', and within the term 'abstract' there are many distinctions. We say 'poetry', and we say 'painting' and 'sculpture' and 'music', and everything is distinct, not specific. It is very vague. We do not know what we do, and the ones who at least go on looking, you know what I mean? – but most people don't look, they just sit on their distinctions because the distinctions are, in a way, like chairs that you can sit on and be very comfortable – you don't have to move. You don't have to change your field all the time. You're not going anywhere. 'I'm an abstract artist'; 'I'm a kinetic artist'. That's why I don't like the word 'kinetic', because I don't feel I'm a kinetic artist. I would like to find a more specific word for my work, but I am at a loss, because I can only find many words and not just one. I am at a loss for a title.

AB It's a cliché: we're all trapped by language, we can't get out of it. So when you feel the need to write rather than to construct an object, you must know that when you are doing it, you are doing something that has to be read. And it's a mental, almost purely mental – other than the side effects of an emotional response – it's a mental response you have to words.

LL Now, that is why I put words on *cylinders* in the first place, because when I decided to make words move, it was quite spontaneous.

AB So the words you put on the poem machines were really not readable in the conventional way . . . by that I mean they're not narrative.

LL No, they're not narrative. When I put words on cylinders and cones and made the poem machines, I wanted the word to be seen in movement, splitting itself into a pure vibration until it became the energy of sound. I made the poem machines to transform words into energy patterns.

AB Really, I suppose one could look at it as the same kind of word act which is involved in Tibetan prayer wheels, where the words are contained within the prayer wheel, thrown out psychically by motion – but, in fact, no one reads them. A lot of Tibetans know them by heart, but they don't read them.

LL Tibetan prayer wheels are meant very clearly to be the energy within the poem. The energy is literally contained, written on a little manuscript and held inside it. So you don't even see it, but they know the energy is there. So they wave it around. I had never seen a Tibetan prayer wheel. I had never heard of a Tibetan prayer wheel. In fact, a couple of years later, when I was in Athens, somebody brought me one, and at that time I was making those hand-held poem wheels which actually looked like Tibetan prayer wheels.

AB But you have written narrative poems as well.

LL I've written poems . . .

AB I'm sorry, I didn't mean to say *but* you have – because that sounds like an accusation. You have *also* written narrative poems.

LL I have written poems. I don't conceive of it as poetry. I just thought I want to say something.

AB Is there, in your opinion, anyone else who works in the same way as you do? Is there anyone whose work you return to?

LL I would like to say that I think that there not only isn't anyone else who works in the same way, but shouldn't be. I do not see why an individual should be the same as another individual. In other words, even that much the same as we would call 'like'. We are all different. And my development and all the accidents which made me what I am are different from other accidents. And mine are really quite different because I had such an irregular life. I didn't go to art school, as I mentioned. But in any case, there are always differences. The only person I could say I related to, in a certain way, was Takis. And the main way in which I can say I'm like him is that I have a great respect for materials . . . a great love for the materials with which I work.

AB Something you said earlier, when we were looking at your work together, pleased me a lot. You told me that – I asked you how you determined the facets on your rotating columns – and you said they were very casual. *Random* is the word you used. It surprised me, because I think of your work as being very precise.

LL It *is* very precise. You see, as we said before, I am concerned with being specific. In other words, the precision of my work doesn't mean that it's ordered, that it's completely pre-calculated or pre-planned. It is to a certain extent, but, I mean, although every detail is thought out, I don't plan the actual movement. That's the one thing that has to be random. Just as when conceiving a prism piece, I plan everything except the actual light.

AB The *movement* of light . . .

LL Yes. I've actually made regular patterns on my columns.

AB And they've been unsuccessful?

LL Well, they're not as alive as irregular patterns, and I realised, through experience, that I have to give freedom to the line.

Continued

AB Well, that randomness is in the light anyway, isn't it?

LL Light is, and it is not, random. And everything is and is not random. I mean, everything is random in the sense that it is affected by outside and unpredictable occurrences. Beyond three variables, I think, you can't map anything without a computer. I believe this is true in physics. If you have more than three variables, it's very, very complex mathematically to map out. And ... what I do is to set up variables.

AB So no art can ever be really precise?

LL Precision can be found in the realm of extremely minor technological statements. Precision is in the realm of technology, and, listen, is technology precise? It attempts to be, because technology follows the paradigms that have been set up, the laws set up by pure science. And these laws cannot be considered precise.

AB You mean the laws keep changing because they are continually disproved.

LL No, because theoretical physicists have realised that they themselves are involved as observers in their experiments, and everything has to pass through the filter of their minds. And so their attempts at precision distort the flow of what passes through their minds, and they know this. David Bohm calls it 'looking through frames'. He says we just catch a frame of the flow, and by framing it, we distort it.

AB Would you object if your work were called – say for an exhibition – and someone asked you to call it 'Language'. How would you feel about that?

LL I think that would be very nice.

AB Yes. Not many artists would agree to it, except conceptual artists now who have suddenly discovered that language ...

LL Look how they've discovered it! They've discovered it, I find, on the most primitive level. Discovered it by reverting to the actual language, you know, and using it and showing it. That way, to me, is impoverished – the way they've discovered it.

AB I agree it's the most impoverished and the most unspecific language they're using.

LL Totally unspecific. In fact, they're co-opted ...

AB Co-opted?

LL Yes, co-opted by the system. They are system-people. Committed to the machine. Neutrals.

AB Concept now means a particular kind of art, whether we like it or not, but concept also has another meaning, and surely all art comes from a concept?

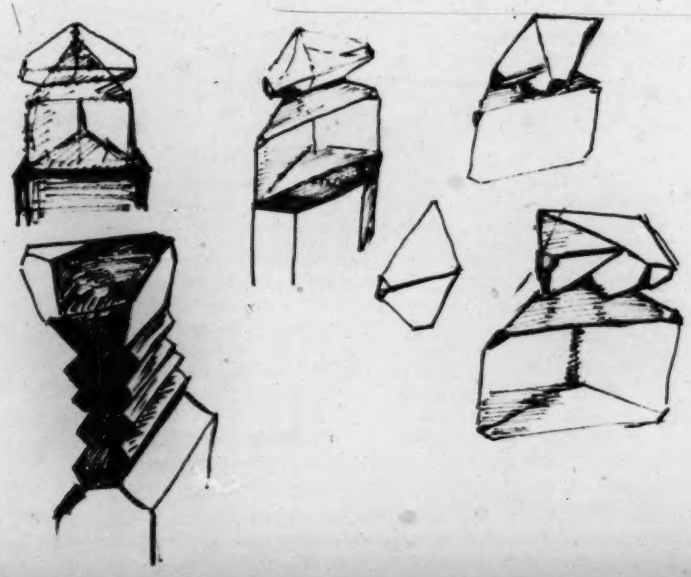
LL Surely? I don't think all art comes from a concept.

AB And in a way what I am saying, which is perhaps outrageous, is that all art *is* concept.

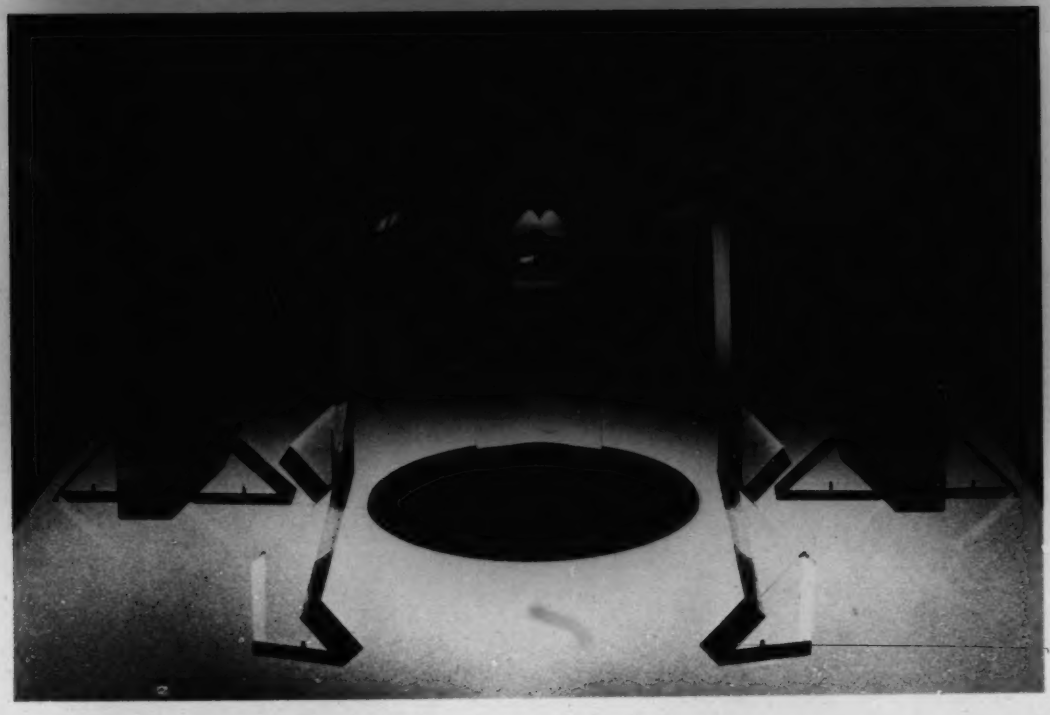
LL Art is only the result of what somebody has done, the work a human being has done. Now, the reason for that work, as far as I can see it, is a transmission and a transformation of energy – of input and output. I think that an artist receives more; I think that an artist transforms more; and I think that an artist puts out more energy. And to do this, in order to put out energy, you have to be specific. If you are not specific, you cannot put out. I think that when an artist ceases to do that – in other words, closes up and does not receive any input – and then does not transform and then does not put out, that human being ceases to be an artist. And I don't care what form they take – language, music or a visual form – to me the particular form has to do with circumstance.

AB So you would say that art is specific – and I'm using that special term – *specific* energy?

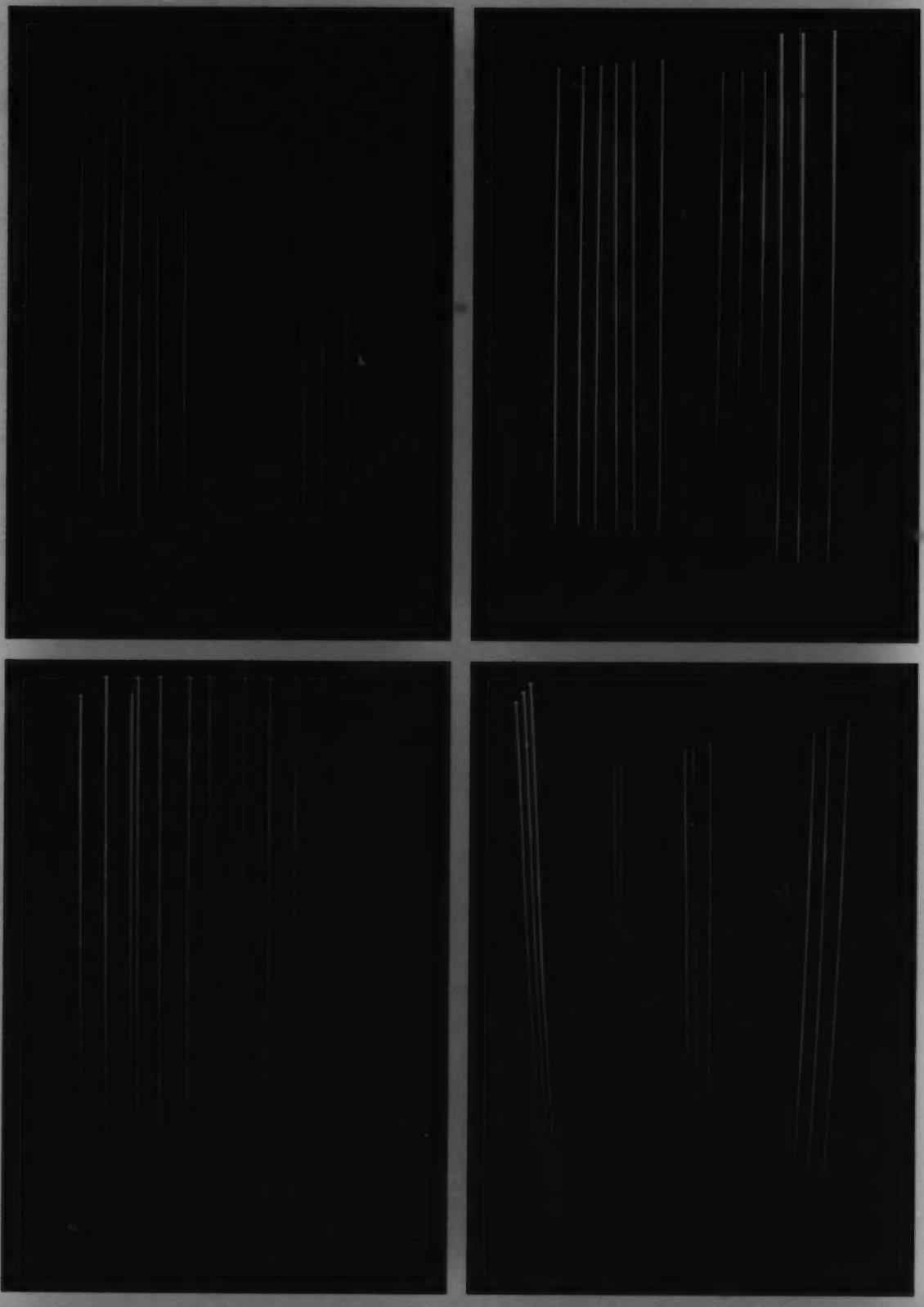
LL No, I wouldn't say specific energy – that's different. I would say that it is energy, and the only way that it can be put out, that energy – expressed, to use the normal term – is by being specific. A poet tries to be very specific with words – not vague, but specific. And those words, because they are so specific – and the relationship between the words is very specific – not any relationship, a poem can only be read *that* way. If you change the words around it's no longer the same poem. May not even be a poem. I think that particular arrangement has energy. That's what life is about anyway. If the molecules in our bodies are not arranged in a specific way, they cannot allow for the flow to pass through, and there won't be any energy, and there won't be any life. That's what decay is. The specific patterns that we're made of dissolve, and we die. It's all very simple.



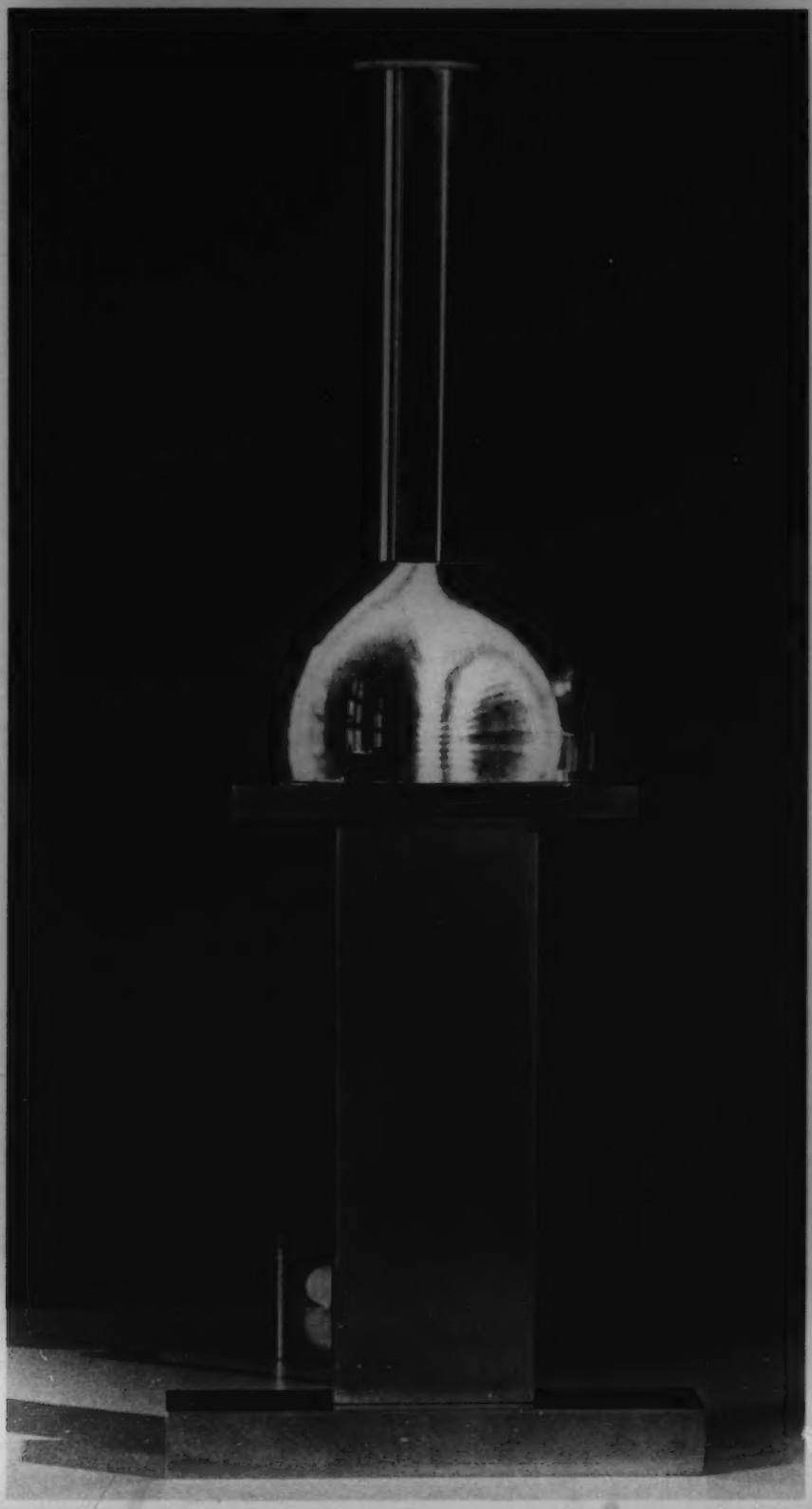
Sketch for prism figures of 'When 3 becomes 5 there is no other', 1976 (3)



Top In the Valley of Darkness, 1973 (2)
Bottom Homage to Milarepa, 1972 (1)

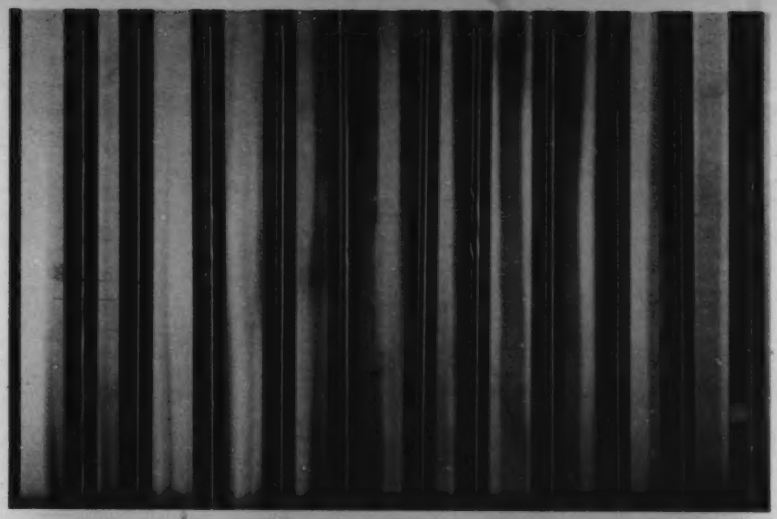


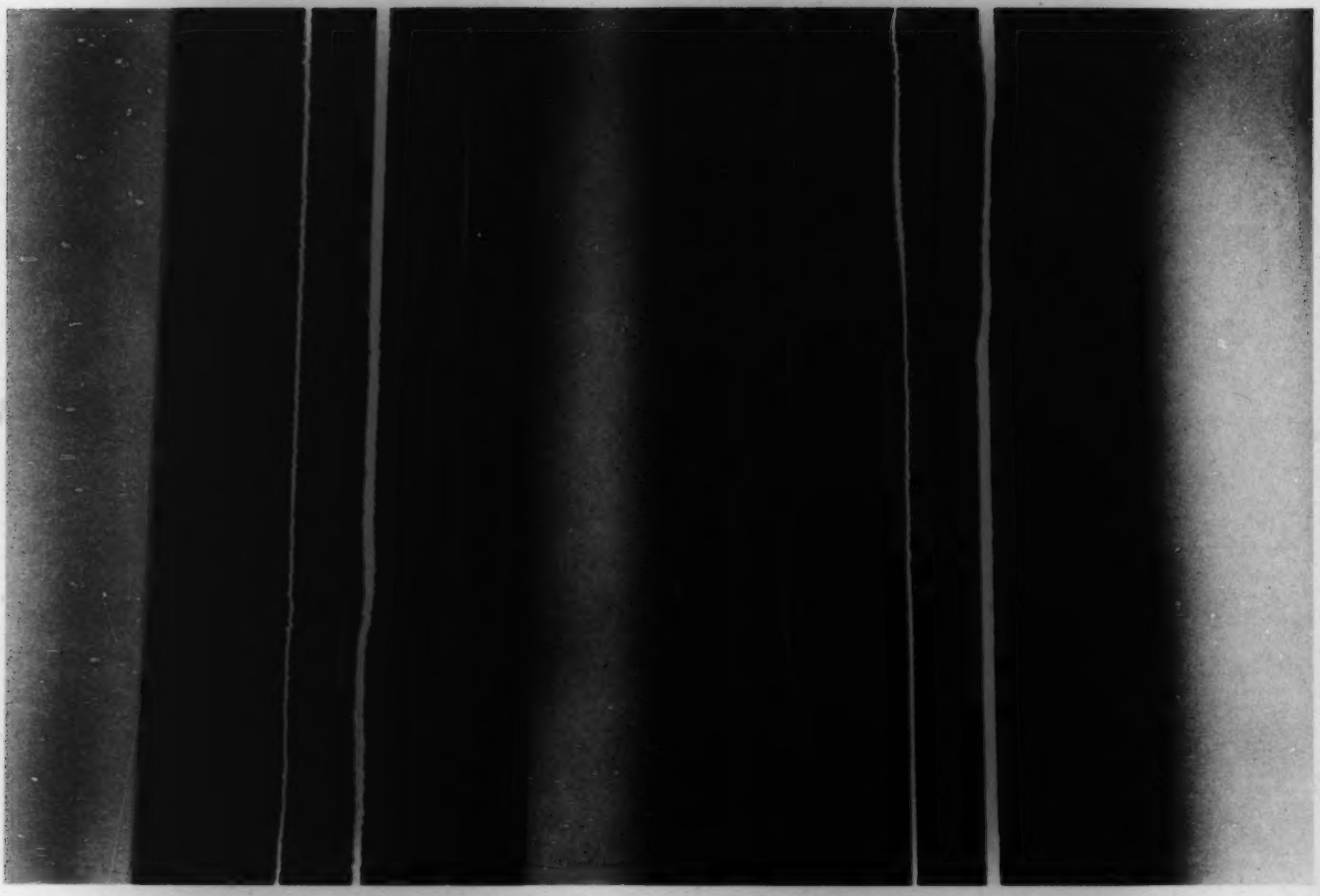
'Thisthat, Through Another Eye and Denslens are alignments of two objects, a nickel wound revolving cylinder and a semi-spherical lens. They can only be seen by one person at a time seated in the correct or exact place for perception. From all other view points two objects are seen. From the "place" the combined emission of the two objects resonates and can be perceived by the viewer. What is seen has no material existence since to approach and examine the two pieces from any other angle but that of exact viewing point will not reveal its existence. It does not in fact exist as such, as a thing or an object, but is an occurrence engendered by the juxtaposition of the two objects, coil and lens, at a certain precise distance from each other. This occurrence is perceived by the viewer, and each perceives it in a slightly different way so that two descriptions of what has been seen will be bound to differ. Perception of it also changes to a large extent with the slightest change in posture so that in order to receive the vision as purely as possible, stillness on the part of the viewer is requisite. In other words, I have set up a situation in which the viewer accepts the view. By accept I mean that the observer is requested to take a passive position, opening and emptying the mind to allow for receival. Asking the observer to take this particular position with regard to the work, I am attempting to place him or her within a framework which will ideally lead to a state of pure concentration, a meditative state of mind.'



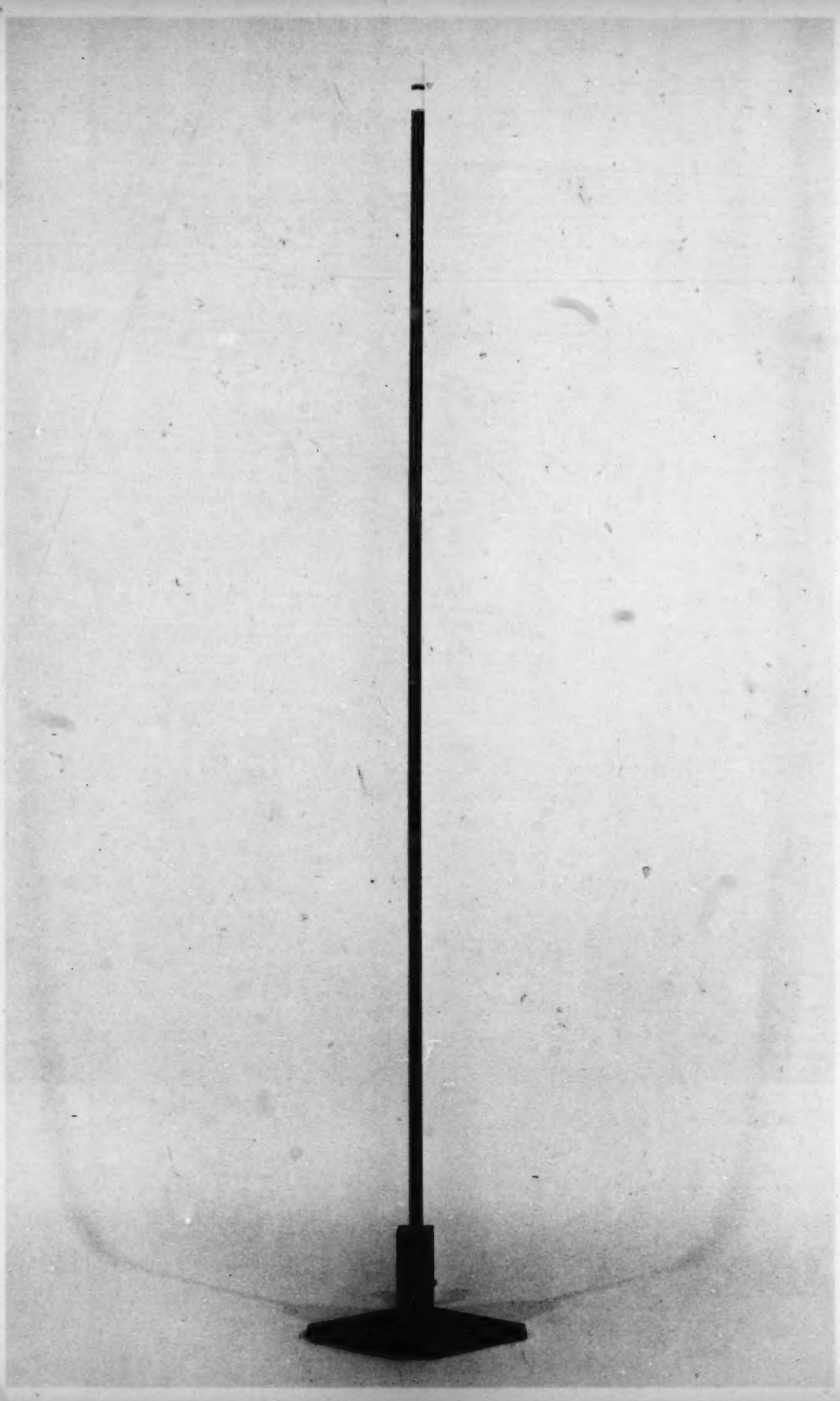
This page **Denslens 1975 (7)**

Opposite page
Threes (in group arrangements), 1974–5 (8)

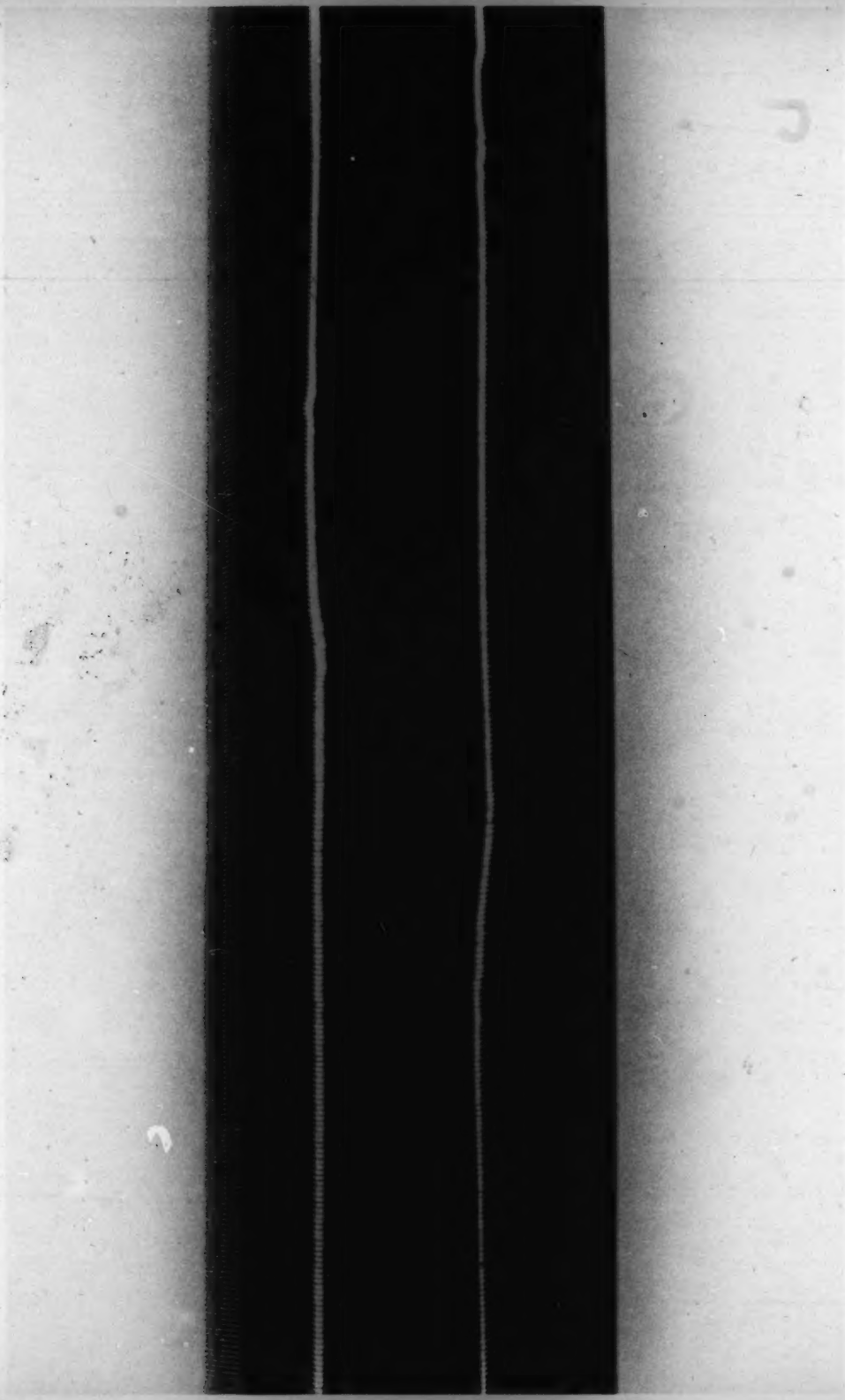




This page and opposite page Threes (Details) 1974–5 (8)



Line II, 1976 (11)



Line II (Detail), 1976 (11)

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Exhibition organised by Sue Grayson

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Bill Culbert

Front cover Outline, 1970 (2)
Above Studio, 1976

Bill Culbert

Born in Port Chalmers, New Zealand 1935. Studied at Canterbury University, School of Art in New Zealand for four years and in 1957 was awarded the National Art Travelling Scholarship to study in London. Studied painting 1957–60 at Royal College of Art. Lived and worked in France 1961–62. For three years 1962–65 was resident artist at Nottingham University. Since 1960 has taught part-time in London art schools and was senior lecturer in painting at Nottingham School of Art 1966–72.
In 1964 was awarded first prize in *Open Painting Competition*, Arts Council of Northern Ireland, Belfast, and in 1968 was awarded a prize in the same competition. In 1969 exhibited a paraphrase of Rembrandt's *Anatomy Lesson of Dr Tulp* with the original at Rembrandt's Tri-Centenary Exhibition in Utrecht, Holland. In 1970 designed stage set/light sculpture for Ashton's ballet *Lament of the Waves* performed by the Royal Ballet at Covent Garden. Lived and worked in France 1972–73. Now lives and works in London.

One-man exhibitions

1961 Commonwealth Institute Gallery, London; Edinburgh Festival
1963/64/65 Nottingham University Gallery
1964 Hatton Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne; Piccadilly Gallery, London
1965 McRoberts and Tunnard, London
1969 Onnasch Nachtgalerie, Berlin
1976 Forum Kunst, Rottweil, Germany

Some group exhibitions

1967 *K4*, Brighton Festival and Museum of Modern Art, Oxford
1968 *Light in Movement*, Birmingham, Coventry, Dublin and Bristol;
Multiple Cubic Projections, Lisson Gallery, London;
Abstract Sculpture, Camden Arts Centre
1969 *Five Light Artists*, Greenwich Theatre Gallery, London;
British Movements, Berlin
1970 *Light Field*, Arts Festival, Bristol University
1971 *Multiples – the First Decade*, Museum of Modern Art, Philadelphia, USA;
Multiples, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London
1972 Electric Gallery, Toronto; *Multiples*, ICA, London
1973 Lucy Milton Gallery, London

List of works

1 Celeste, 1970
perspex cube with inner metal box and light bulb interior
33 × 33 × 33cm and 40 × 40 × 40cm
60 watt mushroom and 100 watt mushroom

2 Outline, 1970
black perspex cube with light bulb interior
30 × 30 × 30cm and 46 × 46 × 46cm
60 watt bulb and 150 watt bulb

3 Bulb Box, Shadow I, 1971
black wooden box with perspex front and light bulb interior
30 × 30 × 24cm

4 Bulb Box, Reflection I, 1971
black wooden box with mirror and light bulb interior
32 × 32 × 15cm

5 Wheel Works, 1972
wooden structure with wheel and metal piece
35 × 20 × 18cm
low wattage neon lamp

6 Asparagus Works, 1973
asparagus cutter with 25 watt bulb
35.5 × 25.5 × 15cm

7 Light Duct, 1973
four chrome chimney angle sections each with 15 watt light bulb interior
51 × 51 × 20cm

8 Through Stone, 1974
stone, plastic insulating tube with 15 watt. bulb
35.5 × 18 × 20cm

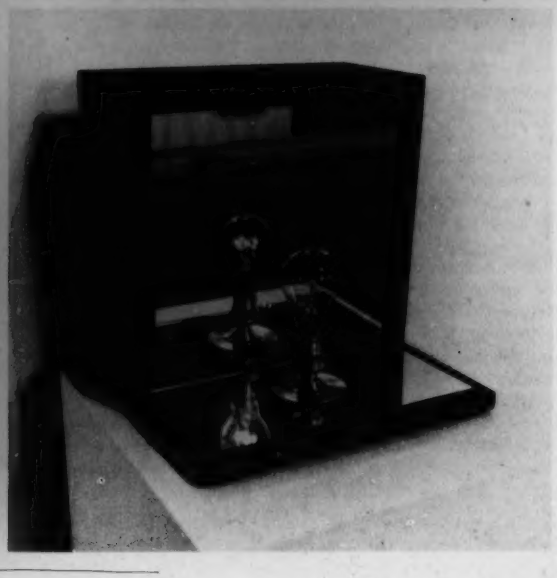
9 Shadow and Reflection, 1975
perspex box with wood base and two 25 watt clear bulbs
18 × 19 × 35cm
multiple (edition of 10)

10 Bulb Box, Reflection II, 1975
black wooden box with mirror and light bulb exterior and interior
33 × 33 × 30cm

11 Black Box with Switch, 1976
black perspex box with internal light. Bulb and on/off switch for both lights next to box
31 × 15 × 15cm

12 Five Cubes to Black, 1976
five perspex boxes (each 20 × 20 × 20cm) 2 clear, 2 translucent and 1 black, 3 with 5/8 watt bulbs on wood base
102 × 20 × 20cm

Celeste 1970 (1)



Top left Bulb Box, Shadow, 1971 (3)
Top right Bulb Shadow I, 1974
Bottom left Bulb Shadow II, 1976
Bottom right Bulb Box, Reflection II, 1975 (10)

Introduction by David Thompson

The exhibition is divided into two rooms – darkness and light, night and day. Such a division may suggest some dramatic polarity in Culbert's work, but that would be totally false to its actual, and essential, seamlessness. Half our lives are lived in the dark, and half in the light: the division is no more dramatic than that. But somehow one is edged into this consciousness of drama if one thinks of Culbert's work as only 'about light'. It is no more 'about light' than Cubism is 'about cubes'. It is an intimate, searching, sensitive (just occasionally spectacular) exploration of the world about us in terms of the one sense which more than any other tells us what that world consists of and how it behaves – namely, the eye. Culbert is a perceptualist. He observes, records, annotates and analyses the minutiae of everyday visual experience which add up to what we call an 'awareness of living', and – because he is an inveterate materializer of ideas – he makes objects to demonstrate them. The objects are as various as the phenomena he observes. Some seem infinitely mysterious and magical. Others seem positively homely, if hardly less magical. Others exist only as photographs – a large and important area of Culbert's work, indicative of a particularly poetic quality in his perception, which cannot unfortunately be fully represented in this exhibition. Others again cannot be exhibited at all, because they involve actions and behaviour. All of them are distinguished by extreme simplicity of means and economy in presentation.

The emphasis in strongly perceptually-orientated art in our time has tended to be on colour. Ever since Hegel and Baudelaire argued that colour was the basis of visibility, there has been an instinct among artists to equate the pursuit of colour with what at one time would have been called the pursuit of light. But where light has been pursued for its own sake, and become as it were independent, it has usually not remained a strictly perceptual medium, but become an expressive one. Artists have been rather less concerned, that is to say, to explore light as a means of 'rendering visible', and rather more concerned with its spectacular, illusionistic, kinetic or emotive properties. Some of Culbert's work, particularly that of the later 1960s and certainly including the famous *Cubic Projections* black sphere of 1968, could be described as 'expressive' in that sense. Almost any light-work, however rigorous, which depends on being seen in a darkened room will have something of such a quality. But Culbert is rare in being an artist who, having worked his way through the colour/light equation as a painter, has dropped the concern with colour without dropping the perceptual bias. Light is for him still essentially what 'makes visible'. It conditions the appearance, and hence something of the very nature, of whatever it falls on (consider in this context some of the paired photographs of objects in sunshine and in shadow). It is essential to our reading of space (and can be made to spell out a particular space, as in *Outline*). More than that, it is almost what 'makes tangible' also. Because it can be directed, occluded, shuttered, cut off, boxed in, it can make us intensely aware of the physical nature of what is obstructing it – hence the mysteriously closed-off *Light Duct*, in which light is almost felt to have turned into a different element, like a liquid or a gas, capable of being contained and held. By the endless variety of propositions with which the work confronts us, perception of light is presented as something like a quest for the definition of perception itself, an investigation of our world and how we know it.

Culbert is by birth a New Zealander. He came to England in 1957, and until 1960 was at the Royal College of Art in the generation which was about to launch Pop Art and included David Hockney, Peter Phillips and Derek Boshier. His initial overwhelming experience of the great European galleries at first virtually stopped him painting altogether, and, significantly perhaps, he resorted to the camera for a time in order to keep working. He uses the camera now very much as a way of recording sequences in time and changes of aspect in a particular object. He used it similarly then, as an extension of his understanding of the Cubist modulation of space and the Futurist telescoping of time and movement. The paintings in his first exhibition, at the Commonwealth Institute a year after leaving the College, were of Delaunay-like hurtling trains and of tugs and barges on the Thames tracing patterns of movement through the course of a day. Over the next few years, the motif changed to cars – his own *deux-chevaux* travelling through the countryside of France – but the basic theme was the same. It was not merely the machine-in-landscape conjunction, it was the theme of rhythmical repetition and superimposition as an image of time (the car flashing past tree-trunks like a sequence of film-frames): the structural theme of an object traversing a ground: of a pre-destined route – 'a line on the surface of a painting is like a road, the join between two surfaces'. When, by 1964–65, the motifs had moved into abstraction, the concern for a closely structured and patterned pictorial dynamism remained. Futurist-style rhythms changed to rhythmical sequences of shapes, marks and signs spaced across chequerboard grounds.

But in the meantime, Culbert had spent a year, 1961–62, in France. Though it was not to become fully evident in his work until more than ten years later, his connections with France have remained close ever since. He bought an old house in Haute Provence, in a tiny hill-top village below Apt, looking across the wide valley to the phantasmal chrome-quarries of Roussillon and its red-earthed olive-orchards which were Beckett's setting for *Waiting for Godot*. All the photographs exhibited here were taken in Provence. Some of the light-containers are based on objects found in the neighbourhood, like the wooden asparagus-cutter of *Asparagus Works*. 'The attraction of Provence,' Culbert wrote soon after his first visit, 'was that of a country full of contrasts – a wilderness juxtaposed with the cultivated: the repetitive rows of vines and olive-trees: dramatic, monumental gestures from the Roman past, contrasted with the vulgarity of taste of the *nouveaux riches*. . . . While one was deeply conscious of the presence of history – of layer on layer of ancient civilisations – one was equally conscious of the renewal of life in the present'. The relevance to the work in this exhibition of this personal response to a particular venue and a particular way of life is profound. In 1962, Culbert brought back from his first visit various *objets trouvés*, among them a selection of old saw-blades. He incorporated them in some starkly austere pictorial 'constructions' of 1962–63. They stood then for certain of his painterly concerns of the time – 'as a means of expressing a fixed line of movement, the teeth giving the quality of repetition, whether visual or of sound'. The experiment was not repeated, but the saw-blades of more than ten years ago also stood for many of the associations which cling round the recent light-containers – associations of use; of memory; of qualities of landscape; above all, of casual, everyday familiarity. In this exhibition, such found objects necessarily become something rather different, more rarified and distanced by having to be museum-processed, as it were, in perspex boxes. In their original state, they retain a more essential ordinariness. As the bare light-bulbs and bulb-fittings are essentially ordinary. As the light, whether natural or artificial, which plays on them is essentially ordinary. It is only the conjunction of object and light, the relationship of accident and design, the interplay of memory and shadow which the fall of light brings into being, which are not ordinary. What the experience of France brought into Culbert's work, and only brought when the time was ripe for it, was neither a heightened interest in light as such, nor a heightened quality of perception as such. It was rather an ability for the work to relax and expand, for the 'touch' to become lighter while the thought behind it became broader and freer.

It was in the year before his first stay in France and immediately following his return, that Culbert became most closely involved with Maurice de Sausmarez, then Head of the Fine Art Department at Hornsey. They had met in Culbert's last year at the Royal College, and now he was invited to lecture at Hornsey one day a week. Maurice de Sausmarez was a remarkable teacher who left a profound impression on a whole circle of young and radically-minded painters in the early 1960s: he was instrumental in shaping the direction of Bridget Riley's first abstract paintings. Culbert and Riley, who met at Hornsey, were in different ways touching on a similar area of investigation in their work – the generation of pictorial movement by playing one structural pattern which was static against another which was subject to progressive change. The discussions they shared with de Sausmarez were to lead both of them towards questions of space and questions, ultimately, of light. Between 1962–65, while maintaining the connection with Hornsey, Culbert was working in Nottingham, as a Fellow in Fine Art at the University. But back in London in 1966, he returned to Hornsey, teaching part-time. Maurice de Sausmarez had by this time left, but an artist who had now come to teach there was Stuart Brisley. Culbert and Brisley developed a remarkable teaching and creative

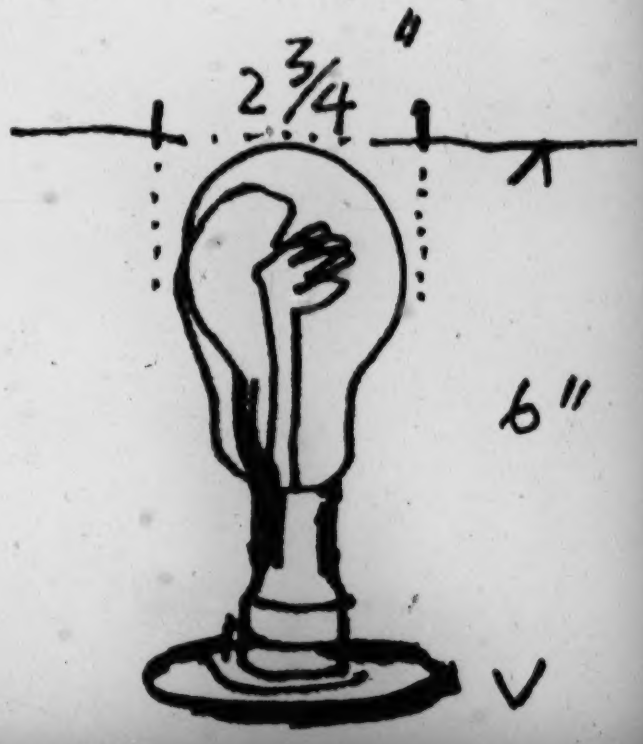
relationship, finding they complemented and stimulated each other's ideas though operating in different areas. Brisley, at that time making pure linear structures in perspex, lacked Culbert's experience with colour: Culbert lacked Brisley's experience of working three-dimensionally. Sharing a dissatisfaction with the preciousness of the individual, personal art-object, they embarked on a programme of joint work. The result was the series of *Neons* of 1967–68. These were cubes constructed of coloured neon tubes which went through sequenced light-changes and colour-changes. They were exhibited at the Camden Art Centre in 1968, and one of their direct descendents is the neon structure by Keith Vaughan and Roger Dainton which now flickers in the night sky above the Hayward Gallery.

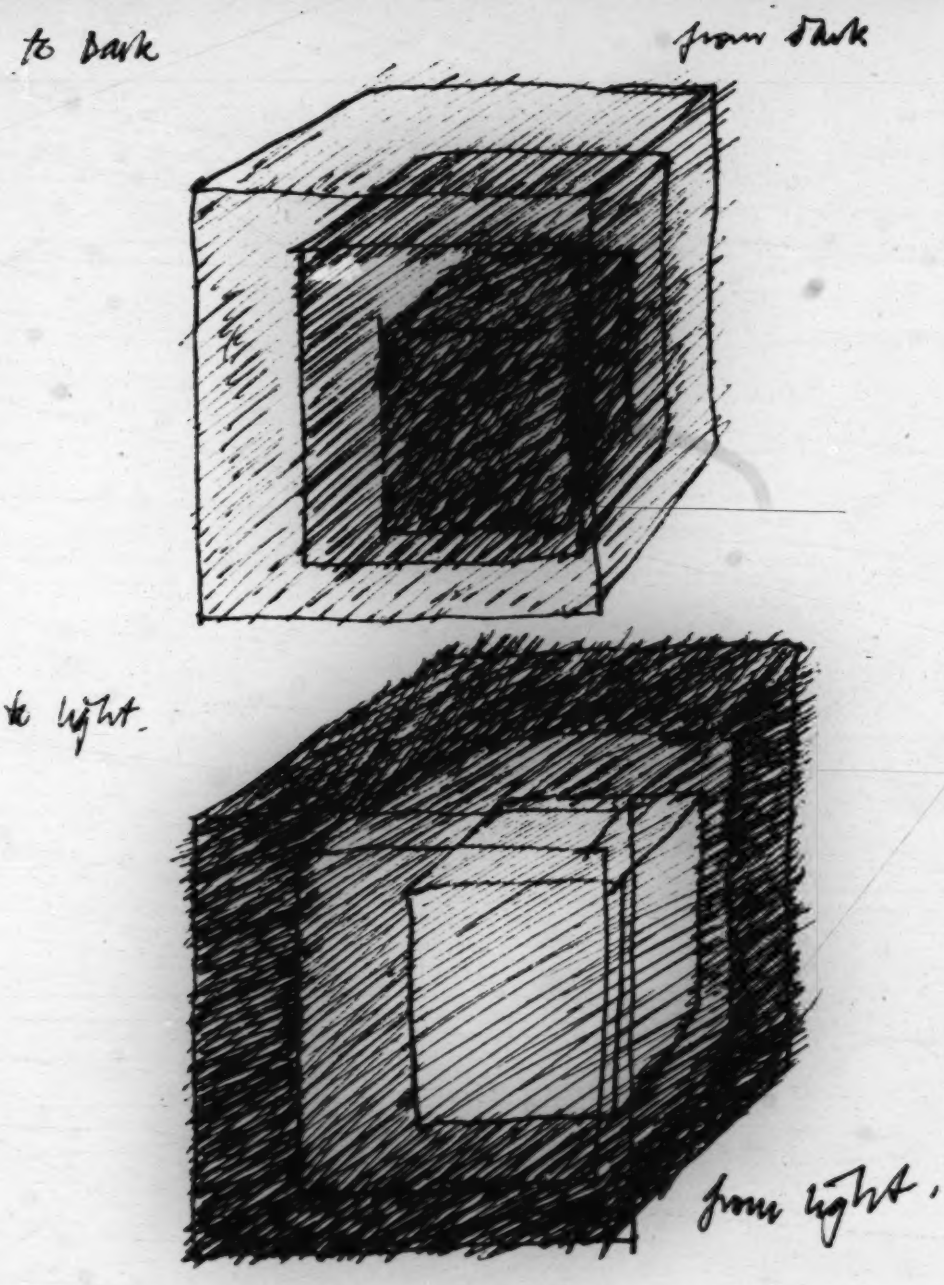
Culbert's painting in the meantime had moved into an area of more intensive colour-research, sometimes on a very large scale, and he was among the most advanced artists in the country concentrating on optical/kinetic effects of colour. One of his concerns was pictorial space, layering the painting with an unfocussed grey to establish a middle ground against which the optical distances of more positive colour could be measured. Another concern, influenced by an enthusiasm for Mondrian at this time, was the independence of colour to dictate its own kinesthetic language. He was now moving fast towards a break beyond painting altogether, and his last canvases were kinetic lightfields of coloured spots in space. It was a short step from spots of colour to spots of actual light, hastened by a growing intellectual need to manipulate and control a medium less intuitive than the placing of painted marks. The light-objects he made during 1967–68 began, as his paintings had ended, with spatial fields. The difference, however, is that colour/space in a painting reads as day, while light shining through holes pierced in a flat black surface reads as night, and lights at night do not optically register as three-dimensional space unless they are forced into it by linear perspective. Culbert's first *light-fields* were therefore tautly and geometrically patterned to 'induce' space by perspective. A series of *light-floors* followed, where the grid of light was laid down like a carpet to establish the space. At Greenwich in 1969 he made a *light-station*, where lights structured both vertically and in depth created an environmental forest. But already the medium itself was showing him that he was forcing it into artificial channels. He was creating certain optical effects by shutting light in a box and letting it read as pattern through the surface. He was ignoring the actual process of shutting the light in the box, the act of containment and control.

Three works which resulted from this realization are the main precursors of nearly all the work in the present exhibition. From the principle of shutting in or occluding the light there develops the use of projecting a controlled beam, and also the use of shadow, both developments initiating far-reaching implications of definition and identity, both in respect of the light-source itself and the object or the space identified by light. Two *light-boxes* represent Culbert's sole excursion into participation-art: plain black wooden cases, they each contain a length of lighted fluorescent-tube – the light is only visible, it only perceptually exists, if you care to open the lid. The idea is carried further in the *Black Box*, a large but totally enclosed box with 24 light-circuits working inside it on an audible time-switch. The lights are never seen, only the wiring for them – an effective realization of Bishop Berkeley's conundrum. The third work is the *Cubic Projections*, the black sphere which projects serried pin-points of light over all the surfaces of a room, creating extraordinary and quite unpredictable effects of spatial disorientation. The object was produced as a multiple by the Lisson Gallery in 1968, and became one of the most celebrated single art-works of the decade – not, unfortunately, on the strength of its availability (it was never quite cheap enough) but as a fashionable *objet-de-luxe*: in 1970 a 9-foot version of it appeared on the stage of Covent Garden as the setting for Ashton's ballet, *Lament of the Waves*. Both *Outline* and the *Celeste* boxes are developments from the *Cubic Projections* principle of transmitting or projecting controlled shafts of light. The *Celeste* boxes, in fact, work identically except that you are now outside, instead of inside, the 'room' on which the 'pinpoints' of light are projected. In both works the tiny perforations in the surface enclosing the light act each as a separate *camera obscura* – a natural lens-effect by which any small enough hole transmits not merely light but an inverted and (depending on the focal length) photographically precise image of the bulb which is the light-source (in *Celeste* Culbert slightly diffuses the image precisely in order to avoid a merely photographic appearance).

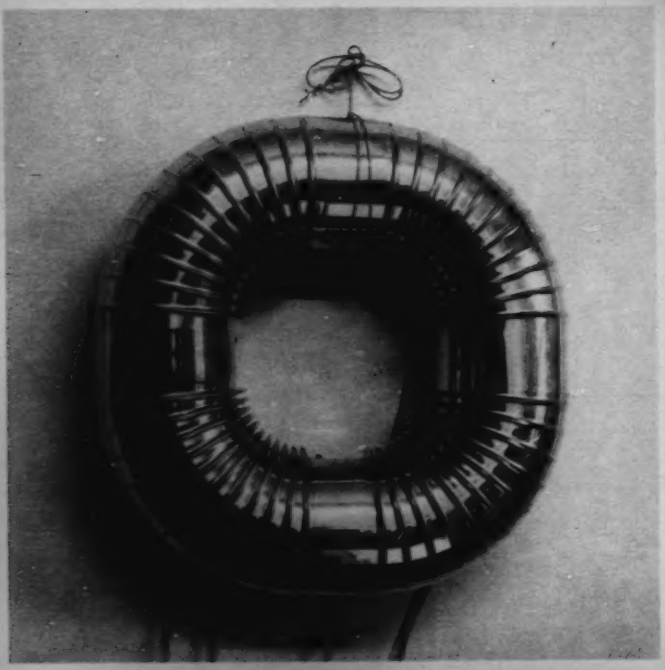
The naked light-bulb becomes, in a great deal of the most recent work, a focus for question after question about the nature of perceived reality. By itself, it stands as the simplest of practical symbols for the existence of light. But as *electric* light, it stands in constant juxtaposition to *natural* light – night-light, as it were, contrasted with day-light – and Culbert's earliest preoccupations with the Futurist simultaneity of time here find a wholly new expression in objects which show, in effect, the overlapping of daytime and night-time perceptions of reality. In such perceptions, the kind of shadow is as important as the kind of light. As one syndrome of darkness-and-light supersedes another, we watch the very nature of objects seemingly turned inside-out – most beautifully perhaps, because with such utter simplicity, in the photographs of sunlight throwing the shadow of a lit bulb. Sometimes our reading of such perceptions is posed as a form of illusion (a shadow which reads differently from the object which casts it: an unlit bulb which in its reflection appears to be lit). Sometimes it is posed as an existentialist question (how do we read a form which registers outwardly as darkness, like a black cube, when we know that inside it is an unseen but lighted bulb?). All these preoccupations come together in the most recent piece in the exhibition, the *Five Cubes to Black*: a kind of palindrome of light/darkness/light which is also a two-way progression between natural light and artificial light. Culbert's light-pieces are the least didactic or sententious of objects. In their total unselfconsciousness, they seem to spring, as so much strictly perceptual art does, from a steady pleasure in the extraordinary otherness of familiar things.

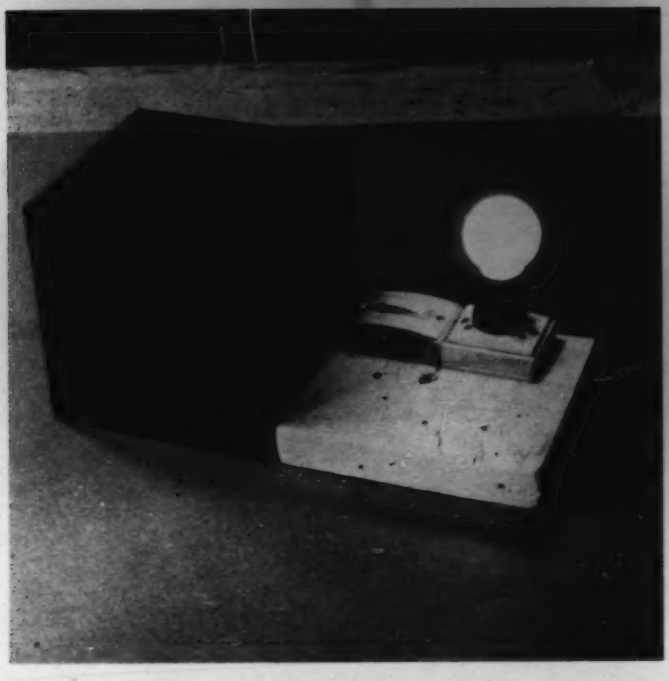
Drawing, 1976

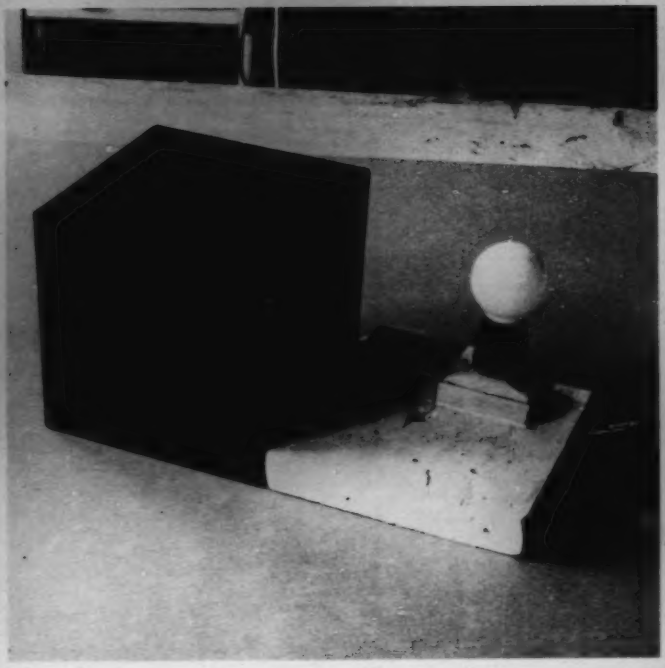




Drawing for 'Five Cubes to Black', 1976



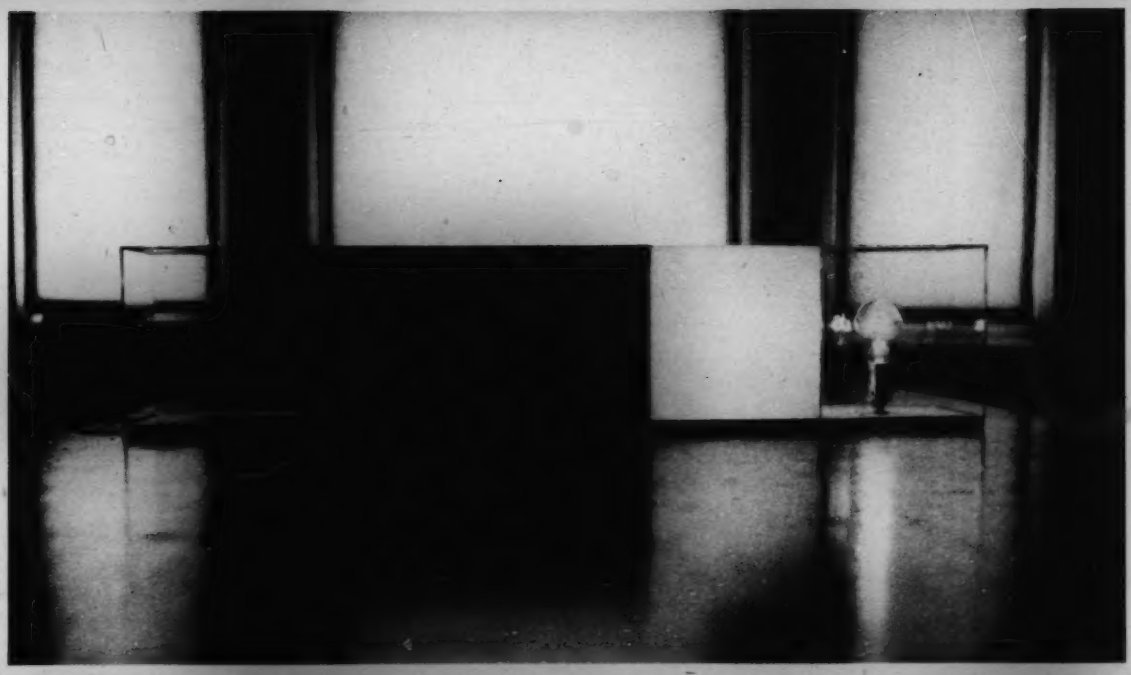


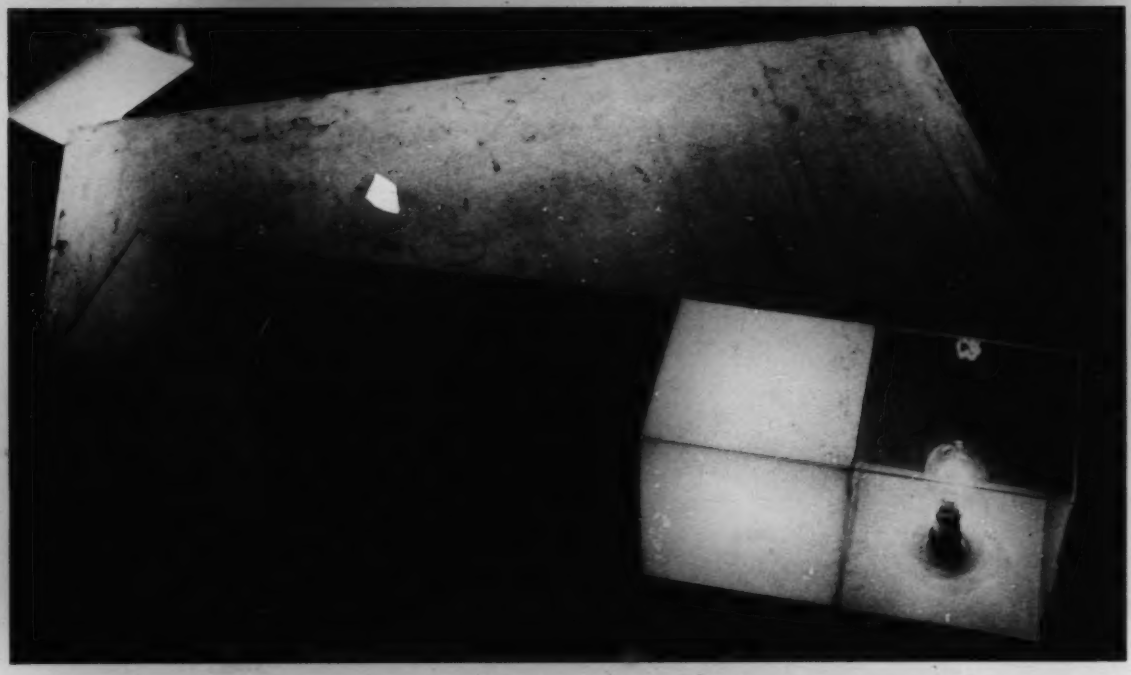


Top left Light Duct, 1973 (7)
Top right Light Duct, 1975
Bottom left Black Box with Switch (on), 1976 (11)
Bottom right Black Box with Switch (off), 1976 (11)

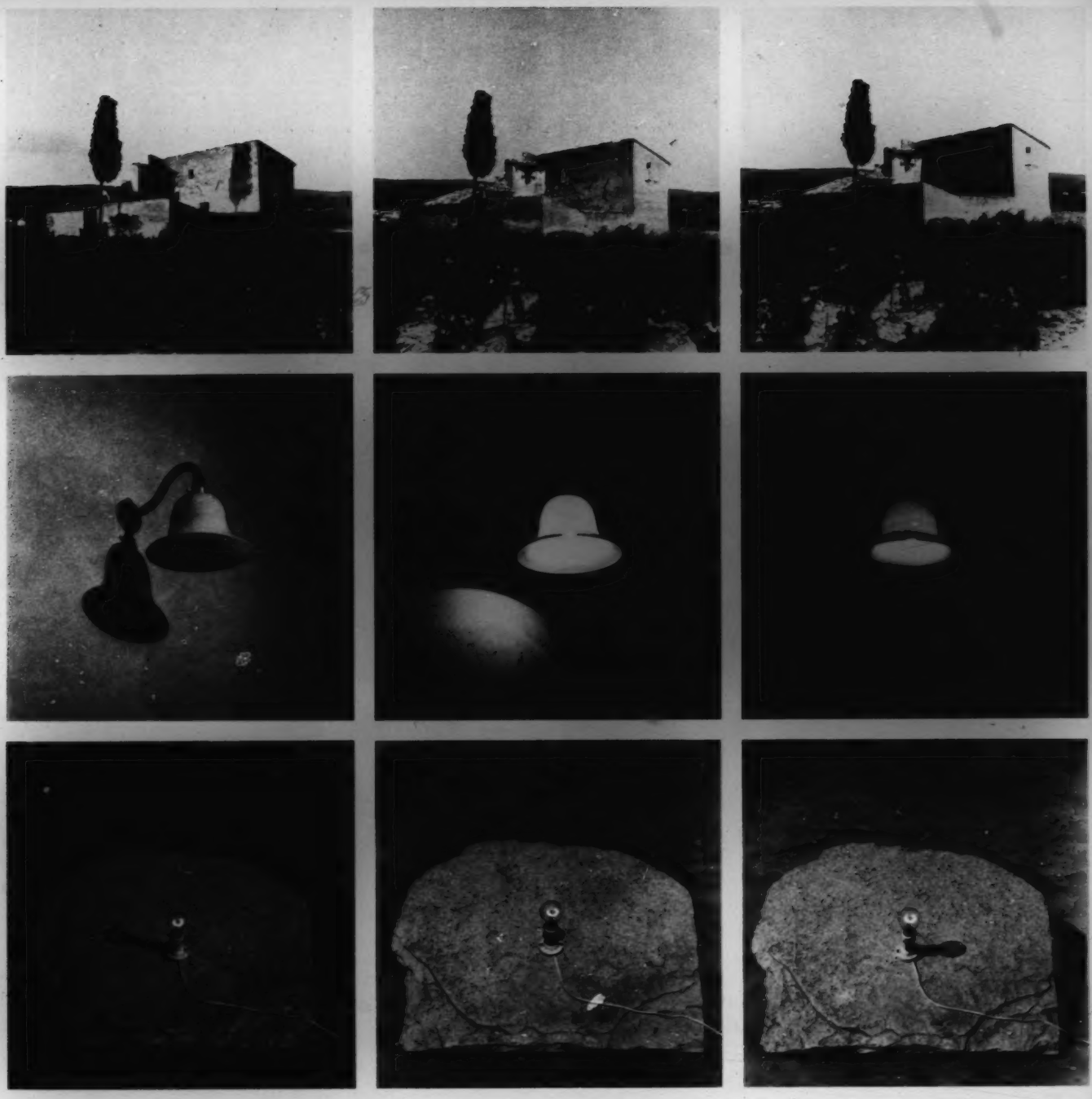
Top Wheel Works, 1972 (5)
Bottom Asparagus Works, 1973 (6)

Top Shadow and Reflection, 1975 (9)
Bottom Through Stone, 1974 (8)





Five Cubes to Black, 1976 (12)



Top House I, House II, House III, 1975
Centre Lamp I, Lamp II, Lamp III, 1975
Bottom Stone Shadow I, Stone Shadow II, Stone Shadow III, 1976

Top left Lamp on Wall I, 1976
Top right Lamp on Wall II, 1976
Bottom left Clay I, 1975
Bottom right Clay II, 1975

Top left Croagnes, 1974
Top right Door, 1974
Bottom left Les Geraniums, 1976
Bottom right Bulb Reflection, 1976

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